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ABSTRACT

For two working-class academics/editors, the book they co-edited, "This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class," is a working-class book masquerading as a traditional scholarly work. Over 100 submissions were received for the collection, and most were autobiographical and did not resemble scholarly essays at all. It was apparent, however, that the contributors did not want to write yet another theoretical, critical, analytical essay. They had to tell their own stories. This disclosure--the "coming out" as working-class academics--is a revolutionary act and also a necessarily autobiographical act. Such a working-class life story is not a threat to an elite university until it is told. The concern over academic versus working-class language made editorial work on the collection particularly difficult. The book, like the language "style," vacillates between two worlds, at times finding itself between two worlds and in a linguistic and social chasm. There are two audiences for the book, and neither will understand it entirely, since it speaks in the language of neither. The contributors had been asked to think about the intersection of class and higher education, but, in most quarters of higher education, the personal is definitely not considered professional. However, the essays, empowering for the writers, can also be empowering for the working-class readers/students presently in the university. (NKA)

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The Making of Working-Class Academics:

"This Fine Place So Far From Home"

I

During my Ph.D. preliminary oral exams, I was accused of intellectual dishonesty. A member of my committee said that my answers sounded like I was saying what the committee wanted to hear rather than what I truly felt. She said my answers lacked conviction. She was right. The only way I can be intellectual is dishonestly. Being intellectual is not part of my nature. I was regurgitating to my committee what I had learned they wanted to hear. I was saying what I learned I was supposed to say in these situations. Graduate school hadn't really changed the way I think; it had only made me, although obviously not too convincingly, appear to think a certain way.

Nothing in my southern rural working-class (white-trash) background prepared me to think genuinely and with conviction about scholarly topics. I was in that conference room to be examined on what I had "learned" in graduate school, but I was called dishonest when I displayed what I had really learned. There was no natural way for me to deal with the questions of a prelim exam.

My working-class way of knowing, my working-class epistemology, had failed me. There is no situation within working-class experience analogous to the preliminary exam. My

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background taught me that thinking or talking for the sake of thinking or talking is show-boating, a waste of time in a world where time clocks matter. My previous life experience didn't train me for the kind of thinking or knowing I was expected to display, so I had to rely on the more recently constructed and much less comfortable way of thinking I'd learned in college and graduate school. I was caught between thinking and feeling, knowing and experiencing. Yes, I was being dishonest if I was expected to truly feel the answers as if they were organic within me. I will never be fluent in the language of the academy. It will always be at best a reluctantly learned second language.

I had set myself up for the confrontation in my prelims by having previously shown my working-class self to this professor. A year before my prelims, I wrote a paper for her titled "Gender Tragedies: East Texas Cockfighting and Hamlet." In this paper I used a significant aspect of my white trash background, weekends spent at cockfighting derbies, to interrogate traditional notions of gender construction in Hamlet. This paper was my first attempt to integrate my background with my foreground, to reconcile the conflicting voices within me and to use an insight from my life in a scholarly paper.

I had shown this professor "my hand." When she saw me performing in my prelims, she knew that it was just that, a "performance." I wasn't being dishonest with integrity. I was a working-class boy trying to pass myself off as a scholar. In many ways, the book I co-edited with Carolyn Leste Law, This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class (Temple UP), is like my graduate school act; it's a working-class book masquerading as a traditional scholarly work.

When Carolyn and I first talked about the project and imagined the sort of essays that

people might contribute to a collection written by and for academics from the working class, we envisioned, more or less, traditional scholarly essays that included unique insights rooted in a working-class background, such as my seminar paper on cockfighting and Hamlet. We made up a few titles for the kind of essays we imagined. My favorite was "That's Doctor Coal Miner's Daughter to You: Discipline in the Postmodern Classroom." Another had to do with white-trash cooking and the literary cuisine of Babette's Feast. We imagined contributors drawing upon their working-class experiences to interrogate a scholarly topic. This wasn't the case w.. the real essays once they started coming in. The essays we received were mostly autobiographical and didn't resemble traditional scholarly essays at all. It's as though we had given our contributors a long-awaited opportunity to write about themselves and they responded with a gush of stories of their lives. Their response pointed out to us two significant things: 1) that there are in fact many professionals in higher education from working-class backgrounds; and 2) that these academics are desperate to talk about their lives.

Almost all of the over one-hundred submissions we received for this collection were straightforward, chronological stories of people's lives; no explicit theorization and no use of a working-class background as a tool for investigation. We couldn't resist this powerful autobiographical gesture. To be honest, I would have preferred this autobiographical stance from the beginning, but the scholar-censor inside told me that a respected academic publisher (the kind that matters on a vita) wouldn't be interested in these autobiographical essays and that such essays wouldn't be seen as "scholarly" by critics and non-working-class colleagues. We would have preferred to ask for these autobiographical stories in the beginning, but we

were constrained by a belief, which the institution quite thoroughly instilled in us, that the stories of our lives are subjective, inappropriate, and unprofessional. We thought that to justify telling our stories they had to be wrapped in a theoretical package, that they had to be presented within a recognizable scholarly frame. Resisting the institutional demand for just such justifications was in fact what many of our contributors were writing about in their essays. Many wrote about the pain caused by constantly being forced to fit into an academic mold which demeans those with working-class backgrounds. By forcing the stories of our lives to do only scholarly service within a theoretical, critical, or analytical framework, we perpetuate the denial of our working-class selves. We realized that we did not want to be complicit in the institutional practice that has always erased our stories. It was apparent that our contributors did not want to write yet another theoretical, critical, analytical essay. They wanted to break their silence, to come out of the class closet. Having interpreted our call for papers as an opportunity, they had to tell their stories. Their stories do not have to be yet again subordinate to a more righteous academic aim. Their stories should be and are enough. Their lives are enough.

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What perhaps made our book unique and attractive to contributors is that it provided the space to finally talk about what it is actually like to be in the academy and from a working-class background. Also significant is that these working-class stories were solicited for publication within an academic setting, for a book to be published by a university press, destined for consumption by other members of the academy.

The essays confront the academy's "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding class. The

disclosure, this coming out as working-class academics, is a revolutionary act and also a necessarily autobiographical act. These essays are revolutionary not in that the authors are working-class but in that the authors admit to being working-class in their essays. In other words, my life story is not a threat to the elite university until I tell it. As long as I don't talk about it, it's okay and the academy can go on pretending that it is classless. Breaking this silence is in part why the project feels so satisfying. We are telling tales out of school. These stories describe what it's like to face the erasure that the academy attempts to impose on those that it accepts within its ranks but then asks to forget their past, to deny their stories.

If we had forced our original agenda onto these essays, if we had insisted on editing them into something they were not, or if we had looked on for essays like those we originally had in mind and ignored those pouring in, this book would have looked like I did in my preliminary exam. The disingenuousness of the essays would have been obvious but not acknowledged. We would have been using an academic voice to tell a working-class story. Imagine the absurdity of William F. Buckley reading aloud from Studs Terkel's Working.

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Although academics from the working class may never find a true home in either world, telling our stories helps at times to reconcile some of the painful ambivalence. I long to write and read scholarly essays that sound like my sister when she's talking; my sister who lives in a trailer house a few miles from my parents' house and continues to talk the way I used to talk, the way I wish I still did, the only way that feels honest. Unfortunately, I can't get rid of the contamination of the academy. I can't put the genie back in the bottle. I find

myself using words like "hegemony" against my will. I just can't shake it. So what happens is that I shift back and forth between these styles (I sure didn't know what "style" was until college, if I really do know now). I vacillate (college word) back and forth (that's pretty comfortable) between my old way of talkin' (very comfortable) and the new discourse of the academy (academic language again, see?). If I take a few deep breaths, then type as fast as I can, I outrun the academic censor and write something my sister and a colleague might understand. But if I go too slowly, I end up thinking too much and my sister gets lost. That's my new goal: not to leave my sister behind, because when I leave my sister behind I leave myself, my family, and other working-class people behind.

The concern over academic versus working-class language made my editorial work on the collection particularly difficult. I don't like to play the role of gate keeper, applying editorial standards implicated in the shaming of working-class people in the academy. Many times I resisted correcting syntactical errors because I felt that in doing so I was representing the institution and its prescriptive practices that the essay's author was railing against. These contributors were not just sending us scholarly papers we could argue over; they entrusted us with precious things that represented a tremendous risk for them. A few of our contributors expressed great concern over the reactions their families might have if they ever saw their essays in the book. They were afraid of shaming their families by telling family secrets, especially secrets from within the class closet.

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This Fine Place, like my tenuous "style," vacillates between two worlds. It attempts to bridge the space between two worlds and at times finds itself in a linguistic and social

chasm. There are two audiences for this book and neither will understand it entirely. It speaks to two audiences but in the language of neither. I do not want to glamorize my working-class past and give the impression that I feel completely at home there either. The difficulty in using my more natural voice in my academic writing is mirrored by the difficulty I have in talking with members of my family about things beyond the current weather and how other family members are doing. The "liberalization" I underwent in college has turned politics and religion into subjects better left untouched. This book is fated, like its contributors, to exist in two worlds and not to be fully at home in either. It finds itself in the good part of town but still appears to be from the wrong side of the tracks.

--C.L. Barney Dews

II

What Barney and I have learned over the life of our project has become a kind of frame-narrative itself, about diverse communities within higher education and about autobiography as a sensitive instrument of critique, certainly the only critical apparatus sensitive enough to register the subtle rumblings of class in higher education. Our inspiration for the book was initially profoundly personal, as we moved toward that ultimate marker of middle-classdom, the Ph.D. We hoped in the book to open a space where we could finally say out loud what we had been saying clandestinely to one another for some time: that where we come from (the South, the working class) matters absolutely to how we interact with the academy now and, more importantly, that where we come from has been a constant and mostly troublesome intruder into our overall academic experience. Nothing in our life stories would ever have suggested our present circumstances.

Our book started in autobiography, our own autobiographies told piece-meal and repetitively. But what we disclosed to each other we still kept at arms length from our "real" work at the university as doctoral students. We were working-class, every phone call home confirmed it, but we were also well-behaved, conscientiously-trained scholars, and so we set about imagining a book of scholarly, well-behaved texts, thinking only such a book could possibly warrant respect from our colleagues and validate our enterprise (and our lives?).

We were surprised when the proposals and essays started coming in. First, we received many, many more submissions and inquiries than we had anticipated, suggesting to us that there are many, many more professionals in higher educations who identify with the tag "working class" than we had ever dreamed of. The second surprise was that nearly all the proposals and finished papers were predominantly chronological autobiographies. When we somewhat naively asked our colleagues to think and write about the intersection of class and higher education, we were really asking about their lives, with respect and serious intent, and they responded in a flood of narrative pent up in some cases since high school days. Significantly (and conspicuously), most resisted any temptation to theorize, analyze, critique, or speculate at all.

As we've said, given our druthers, we would have preferred to ask for these autobiographical stories in the beginning, but we were constrained by a belief that the institution, from which we admittedly albeit ambivalently, seek approval, suffers precious little self-disclosure of any kind, especially in the arena of "serious" work. While the personal may be political, in most quarters of higher education, the personal is definitely not professional. We believed what the institution, through myriad covert pressures and

practices, teaches those of us from the working class and below: the lives we have led (but presumably no longer lead), the lives of our parents, siblings, cousins, and friends, are horribly deficient, inappropriate, indeed downright unprofessional, and we're better off without our unseemly pasts anyway. Laurel Johnson Black, in a piece called "Stupid Rich Bastards," resists the academy's tendency to judge her past (and find it wanting) and refuses even to cast her story in the academy's favorite rhetorical mode, the essay:

> This is not an essay. This is a story. My life is not an essay. We don't live essays or tell them to each other on the front steps on hot nights with beer or iced coffee and pretzels or pass them on to our children or dream them. This is a story, one about love and fear. It's about every child's nightmare of losing her family and the ways in which the world I now tentatively live in tries to make that nightmare come true, to make it not a nightmare but a dream, a goal.

To justify including our lived experience in any work we might ever do in an environment so hostile to it, we thought it had to be cloaked, camouflaged, in a theoretical (scholarly, rigorous) package. This masking parallels the very life stories so many of us tell, of recasting, covering up, even attempting to erase altogether, our working-class origins in the pursuit of academic careers. To undervalue the self-texts of our contributors would have made us accessories to the institutional/structural practices which have always sought to diminish our lives.

* * *

Class poses a somewhat different dilemma than race or gender in the academy today.

We do not cease being men and women when we become doctors of philosophy; however, most of us do cease being working-class when we become professors. In order to claim our working-class identities, we must choose to disclose it, a politically charged gesture, usually termed "misbehavior." While we can't be guilty of displaying our gender or race (usually we cannot help it or we are in for criticism if we don't), we can be and are guilty of exposing our working-class origins because we must decide to do so, to make ourselves seen. In this way, working-class autobiography is in league with gay and lesbian politics on campus and elsewhere, and it is consequently viewed to be as great a threat by the institution, which would have us believe that we are all heterosexual and middle-class. Working-class academics' autobiographies, as does gay and lesbian visibility, shatter a crucial illusion upon which the essentially socially conservative institution of higher education depends.

In "Psychology's Class Blindness: Investment in the Status Quo," Deborah Piper recounts working with nontraditional students in an alternative baccalaureate program. What she found might have been predictable: that her students, mostly minority women, were suffering greatly at the hands of formal education. Their struggle was obviously overdetermined, effected by the racist, sexist, and ageist, in addition to classist, biases of the institution. She writes:

> It became clear to me . . . that the place to begin helping these students with reading and writing skills was by building on their own narratives, their own life experiences. . . . to illuminate the incredible talents and strengths of these women as they wrote of finding ways to advocate for themselves and their communities, as they realized they had strong, determined voices and that they

> were smart in their own ways. Eventually many learned to conform to the canons of academic writing and learned how to create well-formed arguments, but all became empowered by their own life stories.

Piper, in describing her students' experiences, might very well be describing her own experience in the academy. Her essay does for herself what she recognizes as most helpful for her students. By creating an academic self-text for publication in our book, she is "building on her own narrative, her own life experiences" to overcome the institutional oppression of working-class students, herself included. This Fine Place So Far From Home, along with recent books by Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey (1984), Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth Fay (1993), and Janet Zandy (1990), offer academics from the working class the space to do that work for themselves, the work Piper encourages her working-class students to do--to find power in their own autobiographies.

And I would add, to become empowered by the life stories of others as well. For what working-class autobiographies do best is develop community and aver that the emperor has no clothes. We are finding that the working-class academic is not so rare nor so oxymoronic as we feel ourselves to be in the tense isolation of academic departments. Still, the illusion of the class-homogeneity of academia persists, partly because until fairly recently, assimilation was the only and best, and perhaps still is most prudent, route. But that illusion, we contend, hope, is wearing thin.

--Carolyn Leste Law